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802: Histories of Cultural Studies
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Introductory Essay

I struggled to pinpoint a particular cultural text that inspired or influenced my decision to join this program, or a Cultural Studies program in general. At first, as I began to think about this essay, the decision seemed to have been made for me, and I felt fairly passive in its execution, as though I were "meant" to be here, inevitably. However, once I began to list some of the theoretical works that have contributed to my sense of intellectual curiosity, and to think of examples of behaviors, representations, and conversations that led me to this writing, my struggle shifted from trying to fill a blank space, to honing down the discussion to something concrete and particular, some specific *thing* that helped me get here. I finally settled on the list of research interests that now hold my attention, and from there I was able to branch out into cultural phenomena that brought them into my mind at all.

One book that sparked my interests appeared in the Special Collections at the library of Binghamton University, where I was researching a paper for a Comparative Literature class called "Communist Ontologies". The author of the book, William Haver, taught the class. His study of literary, philosophical, and cultural artifacts bore the title *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS*. I became so caught up in its analyses of Japanese testimonies to the aftermath of World War II's atomic bombing, the philosophical inscrutability of the early twentieth-century Japanese author Kitaro Nishida or the late twentieth-century Ameri-

can author Sue Golding, and the provocative writings and artwork of the American David Wojnarowicz, that I left the paper for Professor Haver's class unwritten until two nights before its due date. As I churned out twenty pages of a rambling manifesto in forty-eight sleepless hours, fueled by caffeine and adrenalin, I paid little if any attention to the strange comfort of my dark room in the house I shared with six other college students.

The paper that I finally managed to produce, "The Aspect of Communism at the Limits of Capitalism," concluded with a barely-serious section called "Towards a Phenomenology of Baking Bread." Its pretension and loopy argumentation hardly resembled the carefully researched explication in the book that had consumed my attention for two weeks before that. I'd felt reluctant even to cite the work in my bibliography, let alone raise my interest in his work to the professor. Still, I returned to the concepts, and to the critical and methodological strategies, that I'd found in his book, for paper after paper over the next three years. My term paper disappeared long ago, and the questions and arguments that it contained now seem pedantic at best, if not absurd. However, the more that I thought about that class, and its professor, the more I realized how engrained in my own research his mode of thought had become.

The Body of This Death retained my interest and fascination because its critical theory raised more questions than it claimed to answer. How did the apocalyptic economic and domestic landscape influence the style and content of the testimonies of bomb survivors? This question led to a more pressing one for Haver: how could authors and artists produce creative work in such an environment in the first (or last) place? Similarly, Wojnarowicz became a popular and controversial artist during his confrontation with the Rev. Donald Wildmon during the U.S.'s cul-

ture wars - how did he manage to paint, make movies, and write several books in the throes of poverty and disease? These questions of material cultural production all connected to an overriding critical theme, the possible grounds of society or the social in the face of ontological destitution or existential threats. And yet, connecting historical events of loss and tragedy to extant theories of society and culture allowed Haver to continually return to an open kind of questioning, one that constantly took its own conditions of production and question into reflexive account. This movement from analysis of cultural objects to analysis of one's own analysis kept the book fresh for me, and pointed out the fundamental insufficiency of one's thought to its objects.

In other words, *The Body of This Death* forced me to realize that, no matter how slick my rhetorical style was, or how dense the jargon I used became, my own research and writing needed to take into account its own finitude, fallibility, and position in the world. This lesson remained in my mind as I completed my MA work, and applied to PhD programs around the country. I needed to find schools that would fit my research interests, of course, but I also needed to concentrate on the types of academic environments that embraced reflexive attention to their own relationships. When an advisor recommended this Cultural Studies program, he took care to mention the historical and contextual focus of its departments, and its reputation for treating its graduate students humanely, in the same breath as its interdisciplinary roots. As I compared the research models of Cultural Studies to those of traditional literary, philosophy, or other humanities departments at other schools, this program's embrace of both theoretical and actual problems stood out because it asked the same questions that Haver's book had raised to me some years ear-

lier. To that end, I feel confident in articulating a wide variety of research interests as I begin this program.

I want to know more about the political stakes of studying cultural objects, beyond finding a tenure-track teaching position; these stakes seem to matter to others in this department as well. Beyond that, I hope to explore theories that explain how and why performances on stages, screens, or streets affect the world around them. I also hope to combine that line of research with the study of other kinds of cultural texts, such as literature, art, and social dynamics. Questioning how individuals or groups embody their principles and values leads me to think about the networks that form around historical events and abstract ideas. This sense of embodiment, which might range from expression to violence, might also encompass the generative and creative possibilities of changes in the characters of those individuals or groups. Observing the material conditions of creative and cognitive production fascinates me, including introspection about academia as well as examination of artistic collectives, media representations of cultural phenomena, or religious groups. However, all these topics feed into a larger category for my potential study here: the history of profanity.

I hope to define profanity more concretely than has been done in the past. I also hope to articulate a theory that helps explain its context and impact in the world around us. Perhaps profanity encompasses more than the related concepts of blasphemy, obscenity, indecency, or "the curse". Specifically, I want to know how performances of profanity (in everyday life, in language, and in art) have changed over time. This raises other specific research problems, such as the challenge of writing a history of a cultural phenomenon that both transverses and delineates

social and linguistic boundaries. In addition to these specific questions, I wonder about the political stakes of such a theory. More generally, I want to know what any literary or cultural theory does for people outside of academia. Understanding that efficacy might help me justify the esoteric and obscure interests in dense theory that I hope to pursue here. It might even help the taxpayers of this state to feel that they are getting their money's worth out of my education.